

A Division of Plank Manufacturing

A1 Quilting Machines

Australian Dealer

Constantine Quilts

"If you are serious about machine quilting either for a business or just for personal use, nothing compares to the size and quality of a true longarm machine. "



What to look for when considering a longarm machine.

There are many things that are important when buying a longarm machine. We are not referring to "short" or "mid-arm" machines. We are discussing here **longarm machines** with a **quilting space of 16" or more**. **Please do not mistake this for throat length. There is quite a difference between a 16" throat length and 16" quilting space.** Many features are used more than others. What some might not think of doing without, another person just doesn't see the point.

Let's first look at the features that are on all longarm machines..

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Track Systems

For starters, every longarm machine has a track system. All longarm machines have wheels that guide the movement of the machine both vertically and horizontally. Some track systems are better than others in the way they make the machine move. A longarm machine will either have wheels running horizontally on the tracks or vertically riding with their weight on the tracks. A-1 machines have their wheels running vertically on the track. This along with their new **Tracknology Wheel System** makes the machine move with ease regardless of what direction it is stitching in. This Tracknology System also has a revolutionary way of dealing with the wheels. Many machines with track systems similar will have 8 wheels. These wheels will have groves in them that all ride along a raised point on the track. As the machine moves, the track stay inside the wheels making the user to force slightly more movement on the machine to get the needle to go where it needs to go. With the A-1 Tracknology System, only 4 of the wheels are grooved. The other 4 wheels are flat. By having the track system set up in this manner, the 4 wheels that are flat create just enough ease while the quilter is moving the machine for the wheels to let-up their restriction just at the precise moment it is needed. No other longarm machine on the market today can move with precision like the A-1 Elite with it's Tracknology System.

Machine Weights

Now lets look at the weights of longarm machines.... You will notice in your research that some companies will tout that their machine is the lightest or their machine only weighs XX pounds and so on. Please do not pay attention to how much a particular machine weighs. While the A-1 Elite is one of the lightest machines out there, weight is not what is important when choosing a longarm machine. We've already talked about the track systems for longarm machines. The track system along with balance is what makes or breaks the ease of movement for all longarm machines. If a machine is heavier but is balanced between the back of the machine and the front AND it has a track system to reduce resistance then the weight of a machine is not an issue. The A-1 Elite machine is perfectly balanced from the front to the back of the machine. When you are quilting from the front of the machine and have the machine stretched to it's furthest point, it should run smooth. If a machine starts vibrating when in this position, then there is definitely a weight balance issue. You will notice this more with some of the machines that are out there with larger throat space.

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Stitch Regulators

Now it's time to talk about stitch regulators. There are many stitch regulators on the market today. A-1 Elite's stitch regulator is manufactured by S&D Stitches. While a separate company manufactures it, S&D Stitches will only install their Stitch Rite regulator on A-1 machines. A-1 Quilting Machines and S&D Stitches have worked together for years. When A-1 first started out they were using another national brand stitch regulator. After having numerous problems with this brand of regulator, A-1 went into agreement with S&D Stitches and now both are exclusive to each other. This union has developed the best stitch regulated machine available.

What is important with a stitch regulator? Many will argue it is stitch quality or ease of use and so on. While A-1 Elite system can easily win both of these arguments, what's really important is how flexible a stitch regulator can be. A-1 Elite's Stitch Rite system has two modes to it. In addition to two modes (Standard S/R mode and Cruise Mode), it also has the flexibility of about 15 different speeds within it's Cruise Mode. Cruise mode is a stitch regulator like none other. Once you try it you will discover why it has been the talk of the town ever since it's debut in early 2003.

Let's try and explain the normal workings of a stitch regulator. Most stitch regulators are systems that detect what direction the machine is moving and then sends a signal to the machine's motherboard. This signal tells the machine which direction to move, keeping the stitches uniform in length. Most regulators you turn on with a button on the machine. At this point the machine will not stitch until you move it. You need to move the machine to get the stitch regulator activated. This is nice when you want to hesitate in the middle of a design and so on. You can usually hesitate and the machine will just sit there and then you move it again and it will start stitching. This was how the original stitch regulators operated and most still do today. The A-1 Elite's standard stitch regulator mode also behaves in this fashion. This form of stitch regulation does have its flaws however...since the machine is waiting for you to move it, there is a slight hesitation between your movement and the machines capability. This results in an ever so slight jerk. Most of the time the quilter is moving faster than the machine can keep up with. When in this mode, or with all other stitch regulators on the market today, you will feel when it is engaged. Many quilters with these types of stitch regulators wear themselves off stitch regulation because their machines feel so much smoother outside their stitch regulated modes.

Then came along A-1 Elite's Cruise Mode.....

Now, as never before a longarm quilter can keep their stitch regulator on 100% of the time. Above we explained how a stitch regulator works. Remember when you hesitate the needle stops moving and then when you move again it starts back up? Well in the Cruise Mode, the needle keeps on moving. You might think, "how in the world is this better". Until you try it you might not grasp the importance of this. Remember also that we said the quilter sometimes quilts faster than the regulator? Well now the regulator is not stopping the needle at all and so therefore is keeping up with the quilter. No longer do you get a jerk when switching directions. **The A-1 Elite machine feels the same when the stitch regulator is on as it does when it's turned off.** Since the needle continues to move, there is a smooth continuous movement to the machine.

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Now we will explain the **speed controls** within the Cruise mode. With all the other stitch regulators that are on the market today you have your choice of speeds. Fast or slow...period. Well that's kind of like putting quilters all in the same box. They either quilt fast or they quilt slow. With the A-1 Elite's Cruise Mode there are approximately 15 different speed settings. A quilter can turn it down very, very slow (like for appliqué) to have ultimate control, or turn it up very, very fast when she/he is familiar with the pattern they are doing or for freehand work. No two quilters quilt at the same speed. Why should your longarm machine only have two settings? By controlling the speed within the Cruise Mode, the quilter can set it to the speed she is most comfortable within the application that she is doing. *Finally the quilter is in control and not the machine!!!!*

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The three features mentioned above are probably the most important features that you need to look for when choosing your longarm. Try them all. Make sure when trying the different machines that are out there that you draw some sort of design on the practice piece and see how you can control the machine while following a line. This will tell you if the machine will go where you want it to go. Next, pull the machine in diagonal movements. When doing so you are using all 8 wheels of the machine. If there is any force or drag whatsoever there is a problem with it's track system or it might be the jerk in the stitch regulator you are feeling. You should be able to draw a semi-straight diagonal line with ease. You should also be able to move the machine with one finger both vertically and horizontally without any resistance. If there is resistance than the machine has levelling and balance problems.

Extra's

So far we have talked about the most important features when choosing your longarm machine. Now let's talk about the extras.....

A lift system on your machine will be invaluable to you if you plan on quilting for long periods at a time. A-1 Quilting Machines is the innovator of the Ergo Lift System. This is a hydraulic lift system that let's you position the table to the particular application you are working on. Many manufacturers are just now seeing the benefits of this system and are now adding it as ad-on's to their machines. At A-1 Quilting Machines (the innovator of such a system) it has always been considered a standard.

Micro Handles – There are many gadgets that are being talked about for use with micro stippling and very detailed work. A-1 does produce a Micro Bar that comes standard on with the A-1 Elite Professional Favorite package. This bar lets you position your hands a little bit closer to the quilt. While with other manufacturers this is a must (because of how their machine moves), the A-1 Elite machine almost handles just as easily with the hands still on it's handles.

Bottom Thread Cutter – Many are fooled into thinking that this would be a great option. While it can come in handy on a domestic sewing machine, there is really no purpose to it for the longarm. When stopping and starting a line of stitches, one always brings the bobbin thread up to the top to secure it. If this process was not done, the stitches would not be secure and might have the tendency to come apart or fray. By bringing the bobbin thread up to the top and securing it along with the top thread you are not left with a little "tail" to go back and cut off.

Circle Makers – The A-1 Elite machine is equipped to handle the CircleLord circle maker. This circle maker is the #1 circle maker on the market today for ALL brands of machines.

Extended Base – A-1 has developed a base for the A-1 Elite machine that is for use with ruler work. This also comes standard in the Professional Favourite Pkg.

Service - It is very important that you have a qualified dealer set up your machine. A-1 does not charge for this service if you are within a dealer's travel zone. Many times owners will want to set-up on their own. While many times an individual can set-up a machine with great success, many times they cannot. A new owner is not qualified to know what to look for. Many times this is the first longarm machine they have owned and are not aware of the things that are important such as levelling, setting the needle position, making sure the timing is correct and so on. Even if you have to pay extra, it is very important to have a qualified dealer set up and train you on your new longarm. Service AFTER the sale is also extremely important. Get references from other customers as to the service a particular dealer gives after the sale. Do not buy from a department store setting. These stores are often set-up to entice you into classes that would be no different than a reputable dealer would personally train you on during set-up of your **own machine**. If a dealer sells more than one brand of machine a caution flag should go up as to where their expertise and loyalty is

In conclusion we want to stress that is is very important to do your homework when picking out a longarm machine. One really needs to try as many different brands as necessary, all the while keeping in mind some of the points described above. These are expensive machines and there is nothing worst than making the wrong choice and finding out afterwards that there was a much sweeter machine waiting in the wings!!!

Linda Fernandez

My saga began over 10 years ago when my sister-in-law saw a longarm quilting machine in Southern California. Knowing of my love for sewing and quilting she encouraged me to think about this as something I would enjoy and she thought I would be very good at machine quilting. Because I was the mother of a young family it was not the time in my life to act but the seed of thought was planted and I thought about it frequently. When my last child was in school full time I thought about it so often that I decided to research the possibility of a business and the purchase of a longarm quilting machine. For two years I studied everything I could find and began to test run longarm machines. The more I learned the more I thought that this was something that I wanted to do. I placed an order for a longarm quilting machine and a few days later learned about a machine that I had not tested and had not heard very much about, the A-1 Longarm Quilting Machine. After talking with an A-1 owner I decided I had better put my quilting machine order on hold until I had the opportunity to test-run an A-1. This was a tough decision because it meant a 6 month wait until I could attend Innovations Machine Quilting Conference. This turned out to be a great decision because it gave me the opportunity, at Innovations, to test every machine, side by side. And that is just what I did. For two days my husband and I tested machines over and over again and talked to many dealers. We purchased an A-1 Elite. After all the research, testing and talking, A-1 clearly became the right machine for me. Still, there are specifics. So why A-1? Here is what I love about the A-1.

Stitch Quality- I think the A-1 superior stitch quality. I felt like the tension and stitch appearance was the best of all the machines I tested.

Movement- The A-1 had the smoothest glide. It was the only machine that I didn't feel like I was playing tug of-war with. I have neck and shoulder pain from a long ago car accident that I live with and this was a concern for me. Would I be able to push and pull for 6-8 hours a day? The A-1 was sooooo smooth and easy, really easy, to move. I do not push and pull. I glide and steer. My neck and shoulder pain have not been an issue. **Ergo-lift-** I have to say that when I was researching machines I did not realize how important this feature would be to me. I did however, listen to many other longarm owners who said that if they could have one feature on their machines, that they did not have, it would be a hydraulic system. Now, after owning a machine, I realize how great this feature is. I would not be without this feature because I love it so much. I use it all the time, many times each day, each quilt. This feature was part of the A-1 package and not a huge add-on price. I was happy about that and so was my businessman husband.

Batting Access- I really wanted to be able to get into the quilt sandwich. My research had lead me to believe that this was a good feature. When I compared all the machines and how you access you batting the A-1 was just the easiest, quickest and gave you the ability to work on the whole quilt area. Now that I have a machine and quilt a lot of quilts, I really like my batting access.

No Vibration- This was a hard thing to test but I had heard, from many sources, about vibration and how hard it is to have to work with. Some machines are notorious for their vibration. The reason it is hard to test is that you can't know how the vibration will affect you. When you test for short periods of time it is hard to know if the vibration will be a problem for you when you are quilting for long periods of time or on specific types of quilts. Since the purchase of my machine I have had an opportunity to quilt on another brand for a few hours. Now I know about the vibration that others talk about. I did not like it. Vibration is not only felt in the handles but it also affects the quilt top. On some machines the vibration causes the quilt top to vibrate. As I worked on a class project, and used another manufacturer's machine, the quilt top vibrated so much that I could not follow where I was quilting. It made my eyes and head ache. I went home to my A-1 and it felt so good, no vibration. . So, why is there no vibration on the A-1? Stewart Plank engineered the A-1 table with stabilizing support that absorbs and minimizes vibration. Take a look at the A-1 table. Notice how it is built like a bridge with a truss for extra support in the middle. This simple engineering design eliminates vibration. It also adds stability to the center of the table allowing the carriage to glide more easily.

Easy maintenance- Maintenance is very easy on the A-1. Dust and remove lint. Remember to oil frequently. Add grease as needed. There is a little more to it but I learned it so gradually that it feels so easy. Although this is a very individual choice and everyone looking to purchase a longarm must decide which machine is best for them, I am very glad that I had the opportunity and the time to learn and test all the machines on the market. I have been so happy and satisfied with my choice of the A-1 Longarm Quilting Machine.